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Yellow Perch and Lake Michigan

What's the future of yellow perch fishing in Lake Michigan?

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the Great Lakes Fishery Commission recently hosted a Yellow Perch Summit at the University of Illinois Chicago to consider that question.

I left the meeting hopeful about the future of yellow perch in Lake Michigan.

The natural resources agencies, organizations, and individuals who were there are committed to working together on lakewide efforts to sustain the perch fishery in the lake.

As I told summit attendees, Lake Michigan fish populations know no state or other boundaries. Their management requires cooperation among all of us.

Presentations by invited experts at the summit detailed the status of yellow perch in Lake Michigan, and why fewer perch than decades ago may be the new "normal."

Offshore productivity in Lake Michigan is much lower today than it was during the last "heyday" for perch fishing in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Productivity is now very similar to Lake Superior, the larger and colder Great Lake to the north. The food web for yellow perch in Lake Michigan also has changed due to the presence of invasive mussels, spiny water fleas and round gobies.

Changes in productivity and the food web mean less food is available, which affects perch recruitment, or the number of fish reaching reproductive age. Low or inconsistent recruitment means fewer perch are available for anglers to catch. Clearer water in the lake also may mean adult perch spend less time near-shore in the summer, another factor that can affect perch fishing success.

Since the early 1990s, when yellow perch populations declined rapidly in Lake Michigan, fisheries managers have closed commercial fishing, and implemented restrictions to protect yellow perch from further declines. For sport fishing in Illinois, those restrictions include a 15-fish daily limit, and a closure for perch fishing during July (except for youth under age 16, who can catch up to 10 perch a day during the July closure).

These management efforts may have prevented a total collapse of the perch fishery, but data presented at the summit show lakewide perch abundance remains low.

The option of stocking perch was discussed, but is likely impractical because stocking larger fingerlings that could survive in today's Lake Michigan would be incredibly expensive. There is also a danger that stocking might introduce new diseases or poorly adaptive genetic traits to existing perch stocks.

We heard calls from Illinois anglers for easing or eliminating the July closure of perch fishing in the Illinois waters of Lake Michigan, and instead closing fishing during the spring spawning season. These changes in management are under consideration.

Though easy fixes may be elusive, IDNR remains dedicated to the pursuit of management efforts we hope will lead to recovery of yellow perch in Lake Michigan. That means using sound science, sharing data, and working toward consensus among all partners on coordinated management goals and strategies to improve perch fishing and other Lake Michigan fishing for future generations.

If you missed the summit, the presentations and other information are archived online at this link: http://www.glfc.org/lakecom/lmc/yellow_perch_videos.html

If you have comments or ideas on how to protect the long heritage of yellow perch fishing in Lake Michigan, let us hear from you.

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